



String Lights and Backyard Twilights by everybreatheverymove

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Summary: When El decides she wants to go camping with Mike, Hopper isn't exactly thrilled with the idea. Luckily for her, Mike is on hand with a pretty sweet compromise: rather than risking her safety out in the woods, they can set up camp in his backyard — blanket fort and fairy lights included. (Stories From Summer '85)

String Lights and Backyard Twilights

"Camping."

"Huh?"

El blinks, running her tongue along her lips as she considers her words, "Can I go camping?" She asks, face the pretty picture of innocence and nonchalance, "Please?"

"Where'd you hear about that?"

El shrugs, mainly because she isn't actually sure.

(Maybe Lucas had mentioned something in passing one day, when the party had been gathered at Will's house, or they'd all been congregated in Mike's basement. Despite months having passed since she'd closed the gate, since the lab had closed its doors and shut down (seemingly) for good, Hopper was still weary of letting her out into the world. She was limited to a secluded cabin, a familiar basement or a house that she considers a second home.)

(Or maybe it hadn't been Lucas at all. Maybe she'd read about it in one of the books Nancy had given her last week. Maybe she'd read the word, scanned through a dictionary to understand the word, and she'd decided she wanted to *experience* the word for herself.)

(Maybe it'd been one of her soaps. Maybe a couple had gone hiking, put up a tent in the middle of a clearing, done a little more kissing than El had ever seen, and her curiosity had been piqued — not that she'd ever tell Hopper this.)

The chief takes a swig of his beer, thumb running along the label with a sigh, "I don't know, kid."

"Please?"

"Did Wheeler put you up to this?"

"No." El simply shrugs, and if Mike was somehow involved her face doesn't give anything away. "I haven't asked him yet." Her shoulders

dip and she sinks into her seat, hands flying up to push her hair behind her ears with a huff, "I thought I shall ask you first."

"*Should* ask me first." He corrects, offering a tilt of his beer bottle in her direction, "All right, listen... I'm not saying 'no'." He shakes his head to reiterate his point, get her to look at him. But his expression is stern, and his tone resolute, "But I'm not really comfortable with you spending a whole night out in those woods by yourself."

(He knows they're technically already living in the woods, the cabin being surrounded by only green trees and dry mud for miles, and he also knows that spending just one night cooped up in a tent outside wouldn't be that different from another night spent in the cabin. Hell, she could just pitch a tent up outside the front porch and call it a day. But, nevertheless, he's not a fan of the idea.)

"Not by myself." She straightens her posture then, palms lying flat on the table, "With Mike."

"Sure." Hopper rolls his eyes, "And how is Mike supposed to protect you if-

"He won't need to. I'll protect *him*." She says, "I'll protect us both."

"El."

"Please?"

"Why don't you just wait until next weekend, huh?" The man suggests, "I'll take time off work and I can go with you instead."

(That is, if she's so determined to go camping and not just camp right outside the cabin where he can watch over her, protect her, make sure she doesn't burn the smores.)

His gaze softens when El's gaze lowers, brows plainly scrunching in disappointment, "I'm probably a better camper than Wheeler anyway. I don't think that kid could start a fire if his life depended on it."

Without so much as a reply, El stands from the table, picking up her plate of half-eaten mashed potatoes, peas cleared and fork scratching the porcelain, "Fine."

Hopper waits until she's by the trashcan, scraping off the remnants of her food before he finally turns in his seat to observe her. She runs the knife slowly along her plate until the cold mash plops into the trash-bag, and she seems to suck at the insides of her cheeks to keep herself from either starting a fight or letting tears fall.

(Hopper can't decide which is worse.)

"Hey." He pushes at the back of his chair, lets the old wood creak as it grinds against the floorboards before he continues, "I'm sorry, okay?" He says, "It's just-"

"Not safe." Her plate drops into the sink with the quietest of *clanks*, and she shoves her hands into the front pockets of her short overalls, fingers stretching the material out from the inside. El focuses on a small thread of her right sock, voices a small, "Okay."

(Way to make him feel guilty, kid.)

"We could always watch a movie?" Will offers.

(The three of them are in the Byers' kitchen, waiting around the table for the rest of the party to arrive. There's a can of ginger ale, two cooked and cold Eggo waffles, and neatly stacked pile of borrowed books El is to take home on the table.)

"Again." Mike mutters under his breath, earning a nudge from Will. The smaller boy gives him a look, nodding in El's direction. "I mean, yeah, sure."

"We should wait" El says, asks, "for the others?" She blinks, staring up at Mike as though in a daze. He only shrugs, smiles halfheartedly in response.

Will rolls his eyes then, taking charge of the situation. "Well, why don't we pick a movie already?" He suggests, "That way we can just start it when they arrive."

The other two nod in agreement, and Mike moves to sit down in the kitchen chair beside the lone girl. He stretches his legs out, rests one elbow on the table.

"I guess I'll just pick it then." Will huffs, seeing as neither of the pair make to go and find a tape. Will wanders off, hands shoved in the back pockets of his black denim shorts.

El waits until he's in the living room before she speaks, gaze set on the chipped surface of the wooden table. "I... missed you."

"What?" Mike blinks, pulled from his thoughts. He stills, stammers out a, "You- you did?"

"Last night." El tells him, finally looking up to meet his eye. Her feet shuffle, soles of her sneakers sweeping over the tiles, "I didn't call."

"Oh." The tall boy sighs, eyes closing in understanding. His brows draw together, and the tip of his nose twitches just slightly, "I get it. I mean, I wasn't home anyway, but," Mike pauses, almost blushes, "I missed you, too, actually."

"You did." It's not a question, and he doesn't need it to be.

(She understands him.)

"What did you do?"

"Last night?" Mike places his can of ginger ale back down on the kitchen table and he looks over at the girl beside him, seat now turned sideways so she can face him directly. He grins, "I was at Dustin's," he shrugs, nonchalant now, "He got this new game for his birthday he wanted to try out, so..."

"Cool." El tries for a smile, but it never reaches her eyes. She nibbles at her bottom lip, pretends she doesn't notice when Mike frowns, in concern and some kind of empathy.

"What about you?" The boy asks. He wraps his right foot around the leg of the chair, swivelling it around with a screech so he can face her properly. His grin reappears then, corners of his mouth curling into an endearing smile, and she knows he's trying to comfort her. "You probably had a better time than me. I spent half the night wide awake because the guys wouldn't stop burping."

El giggles, and the sad look on her face slowly starts to wither away,

turn to adoration as she says, "That sounds... gross."

"It *was* gross." Mike nods, confirms, and the brunette smiles wider, "Trust me, you're lucky you only have to put up with the chief."

"He's pretty gross, too," she says, adding, "sometimes." El absently slides the can across the table toward her, only picking it up when it stops right on the edge. She takes a small sip, pulls a face, but Mike isn't sure it's from the taste. "I asked him for a favor."

Mike seems to perk up at that, and he accepts the cool tin can back with a nod, "What kind of favor?"

"Camping."

"Camping?" He gulps. "Like, *actual* camping?"

El nods, "Yes. In the woods."

Mike's left eyebrow twitches then, before he can help it, and he frowns, "Yeah?" He drops the plastic straw he's been twiddling around for a moment, reaching over to touch El's hand. The tip of his index finger barely grazes her knuckles before she's twisting and wrapping her whole hand around his wrist, thumb against his pulse point. Mike smiles.

"I wanted to go camping with you," El tells him, clearer this time, "but Hop said no," she shrugs, "I think."

"Oh," the boy pauses, "Well... why not? Why can't you go?" He asks his question slowly, carefully. He's well aware of how Hopper has put restrictions on certain activities. He probably already has his answer.

(No, Wheeler, she *can't* go to the movies. No, *Wheeler*, she can't go to the pool. No, Wheeler, she can't have dinner with your family... *yet*.)

(Mike practically considers that last one a win.)

And, while he knows the chief is only acting in El's best interest, it's still a bummer when they're told that she can't go out and do normal kid things with the rest of them. And it sucks even more that school's out, the sun's out, and literally everyone in Hawkins is allowed out

into town except for El.

"Too dangerous." Her right shoulder hitches ever so slightly and she swallows a breath, long lashes fluttering against her cheeks as she stares down at the Byers' kitchen table, paint strokes and knife marks galore. (Will is probably due back any minute now.)

Mike considers himself for a second, teeth sharp against his flesh as he bites the inside of his cheek, "Well, maybe I can convince him." He offers with a sigh finally, "Wouldn't hurt to ask, right?"

(It probably, totally would.)

El seems to like that idea though, because the soft scowl on her face turns into a full-fledged smile, and she leans over in her seat to kiss his cheek sweetly.

"Thank you." She says, voice laced with sugar and honey, and her cheeks flush when he can't seem to tear his eyes away from her lips.

Mike's leg bounces, and he's suddenly a little more anxious, "Yeah."

(What did he just do?)

"She told you, huh." It's not a question, and Mike knows this because Hopper puts his cigarette out and leans back in his desk chair with a grumbled "Go figure."

"She's upset because you told her she couldn't go." Mike informs him, arms moving to fold over his chest. He shifts from leaning on his left leg to his right, keeping his gaze focused on the chief's face, "She's not happy." He shrugs.

"What, not even *halfway*?" Hopper quips with a chuckle, traces of an amused grin falling as he takes in the boy's stoic expression, "Geez, kid, lighten up." He stubs out the butt of his smoke again, and Mike's pretty sure that he's just doing it to keep his hands busy.

Mike blinks, "Not even a third of the way to being happy."

"It's for her own good."

"That doesn't mean it's good *for* her." Mike points out with a glare, arms dropping to his sides, slack, "Like, I know it's important that she stay out of sight or whatever, but I'm not surprised she's pissed at you." He says, adds with a shuffle of his shoulders, "She's bored."

"Why are you here, kid?" Hopper rolls his eyes, brushing off Mike's pretty obvious scowl as he kicks his boots up on the desk, "I already told her it was too risky."

"Is it though?" Mike asks, dancing around the question, "I mean, if anything, that's the one place we'd be out of sight, right? It's not like there's anyone from the lab hanging around in the bushes or anything."

Hopper groans aloud then, "What exactly do you want from me here, Wheeler?"

"An answer."

"Fine." Hopper eyes him, face square and set, "For the second time: no."

"I said I'd ask you." Mike throws in, "She was giving me-"

"The puppy dogs?" The chief snorts, "Here I was thinking you'd have more control over those by now." He wiggles his eyebrows, joking.

The boy nods, blinking with the dullest of sighs, "What was I supposed to say?"

"I don't know, kid." Hopper removes his feet from his desk, the dirtied soles of his boots leaving dried specks of mud on the tiled floor, "She's not supposed to be out so much. The only reason I let her go to the Byers' is because I know there'll be a grown up around."

"She came over to my house for the Fourth."

"Your house doesn't count, either." Hopper says, "She feels safe there. There aren't many places she can feel safe yet. Besides, she likes the fireworks." He sucks at the inside of his bottom lip thoughtfully, brows furrowing, "And I don't think spending the night in the wilderness again is the same as having a little group sleepover in

your parents' basement."

"Again." Mike repeats to himself subconsciously, mind wandering.

Hopper nods, once, "She's done that one too many times." He adds, stretching out his fingers as he avoids Mike's gaze, "I don't even know why she wants to."

"It's summer." Mike starts — only half an explanation — and a frown clears its way onto his face. His lips curl, and he huffs, "You can't keep her trapped inside a wooden shack for another six weeks and you know it."

"Hey, watch yourself." The chief points his finger then, a single brow lowering in irritation, "I know you think you can do better, all right," he pauses, breathes out a simple, "but that's her home now, kid."

"Sure." Folding his arms over his chest, the boy scoffs with a slight roll of his eyes. They land on the third shelf of the bookcase beside Hopper's desk, a picture frame catching his attention. It's not the picture inside that holds Mike's interest though; rather the frame itself. It's one of those Christmas-themed ones, all red and green and festive. It's shaped like a fireplace, and the top of the wooden frame is decorated with tiny ornamental string lights, the hand-carved bulbs giving Mike the strangest yet simplest of ideas.

"I've got it."

Hopper drops his pen then, having finally stopped spinning the thing around in his hand, "And what would that be?" Hopper eyes the teen carefully, "She's not going camping." The man shakes his head, voice assertive, authoritative. Mike would probably feel threatened if he were anyone else, if his relationship with the man was built more on mistrust than understanding. "I don't care what kind of plan you, or any of your buddies, come up with."

"No, no." Mike reassures him, but he can't help the loud gulp he has to swallow down because, well, technically...

(No, the chief would never allow it. Unless... would he? But then...)

"I just thought of it."

"Kid." Hopper starts, warning.

"Chief."

"Wheeler."

Mike doesn't blink, dares, "Hopper."

"*Michael.*"

"What if," the tall boy starts, shifting from one foot onto the other, knees itching below the hem of his shorts, "What if it's not actual camping?"

Hopper only sighs, leaning forward to slide his elbows across his desk. He grumbles, muttering something under his breath as he smooths a hand over his face, pinching his sinuses as his eyes close, "I'm listening."

He sounds anything but interested, tone of voice far from showing any signs of optimism; every possible scenario is probably already running through his head, a mile a minute, each one just a little bit worse than the last.

(She could be seen. She could be found out. She could be taken. She could be lost to them. Mike could lose her. Hopper could lose her.)

Mike knows that Hopper just wants to keep her safe, that he keeps her indoors and only lets her out for fresh air and socialising when it's — quote — *absolutely goddamn vital*. He knows Hopper means well, that the man hasn't set out to ruin her life and isolate her from the rest of society because he wants to, because he can. But the thing about society is that people need to immerse themselves in it before they can come off as a fully functioning member of a community, of a larger group. And if Hopper keeps her hidden away for a whole year — of which, thankfully, seven long months have already elapsed — she's not going to be ready for most of anything by the time she's actually allowed out.

He's under no illusion that she's just going to come out of hiding in a couple of months, ready for her first year of high school — or any school at all, really — and the world at large, fully prepared and

equipped to handle anything. Hopper's not fooling anyone, least of all Mike.

"The hell do you mean *not* camping?" The chief sighs, "She said she wanted to go camping." He reminds Mike, face glowering with skepticism as though the boy has forgotten the very reason he barged into the chief's office in the first place.

"Hear me out," he sits down in the chair opposite the man then, immediately regretting his decision when the worn leather rubs against his skin, humid and just a tad sticky. Mike brushes a hand through his hair, eyes widening as he starts, "My parents are going out of town this weekend. So, maybe-

"No." Hopper can't help the smirk that forms at that last bit, and he snorts, "Who do you think you're talking to here, bucko? *That's* definitely not happening."

"What? No!" Mike scowls, brows knitting into a crease (in mild disgust because *jesus! they're like fourteen*) as he fidgets in his seat, "I meant, like, we could just do it in my backyard."

"Do what, Wheeler?"

"Camp." He nods once, twice, "Well, not *camp*, but... you know." Mike shrugs, assuming Hopper will get the gist of it, "And it'd be safe, too, because it's a garden, right, so it's not like anything could go wrong."

"You live on the cul-de-sac." Hopper squints, eyeing the boy carefully. He picks his pen back up subconsciously, repeatedly clicking on the end as he contemplates things, taking in Mike's eager nod, jittery leg.

(The kid's come a long way, he'll give him that. In life and height. Hopper kind of admires him. He'll never confess though.)

"Your sister gonna be there?"

"Yeah."

(At least, he *thinks* she is. If not, well-)

"Yeah, Nancy will be there." He grins, mouth drawn wide and teeth

baring.

"You got neighbors?"

"Obviously."

"What are they like?"

Mike pulls a face, "I don't know." His top lip morphs into a half-hearted snarl, shoulders raising and lowering in a shrug, "Old?"

Hopper seems to buy it, or at the very least accept it, because after a long breath — drawn out and just a tad too dramatic for Mike's liking — and a flick of the cigarette he'd lit when the boy wasn't looking, the chief nods. The man cracks a small smile, one of the likes Mike doesn't think he's ever seen on the man's face before.

"I'll drop her off at eight."

"Yes!" Mike smiles, and his hands ball up into fists to avoid slamming them on the desk in glee. He chews at his bottom lip as he makes to stand, forcibly ignorant to Hopper's watchful eyes.

The man leans back in his seat, cigarette dangling by his side now, "You even got a tent, kid?" He takes a drag, blows the smoke out of the corner of his mouth to avoid blowing it in Mike's face. "A real tent? Not one of those kiddie things where you're gonna have to huddle for warmth?" He asks with a look that lets Mike he's only half-joking.

"Yeah." Mike clears his throat because, well... "I'm pretty sure my dad has one in the basement."

"Fine." Hopper sighs in contentment, but it quickly turns to a yawn, "Let me know if you need help." He says, pointing a thick finger in Mike's face as the boy prepares to leave, turning.

(Okay, so he totally doesn't have a tent.)

"Will do, sir."

"Are you gonna help me or not?"

Dustin rolls his eyes with a groan, head tossing back. He reaches back to steady the cap on his hair, and he keeps his hands placed flat against the base of his skull, fingers locked, "Are you gonna invite me?"

"No." Mike pulls a face, "Why the hell would I invite you?"

"Oh, I don't know, Michael. Maybe because we're friends?" Dustin chuckles, "Because your girlfriend loves me?"

"Sure." Mike grins, though his brows lower, "If she did, she'd have invited you."

"Whatever." The curly-haired boy shrugs, "So it's just gonna be the two of you?" He clears his throat at that, offering Mike an extended part of the chord.

"Well, yeah, technically," the taller boy starts, "but Nance will be here." He wraps the long cable around the structure, only paying half a mind to his movements. His left foot almost slips from the ladder when he reaches a little too far over, and he narrowly catches himself on the wooden beam as Dustin grabs the backs of his knees to steady him. "Thanks."

The boy on the ground nods, continues after a beat, "But... Nancy isn't gonna be in the tent with you."

"Not a *tent*."

"Whatever, you know what I mean." Dustin smirks, suggestively offers, "That's a first."

"What's a first?"

"You hanging out with El. Alone."

"No, it's not. She totally lived in my basement for, like, a week." Mike stifles a laugh.

"True, true." Dustin says, and he pokes Mike in the leg then, "And in

your bedroom."

Mike blushes, ducking his head, "Barely."

"Still," Dustin reasons with a shit-eating grin, "You wanna hope your mom never finds out about that."

"My mom still thinks she's just the chief's adopted niece, so..." Mike says with a sigh, "I think we'll be fine for awhile." He adds, "It's my dad and his conspiracy theories I need to worry about."

"Maybe." Dustin shrugs, "You better save me some pizza, at least."

Mike lets go of the cable then, the black cord dropping onto the grass in silence, "What makes you think there's pizza?"

"Jesus, you're not having pizza?" The shorter boy shrieks, throwing his free arm up in the air with an exaggerated gasp, "What kind of sleepover is this?"

"It's not a sleepover." Mike narrows his eyes, "It's camping... *simplified*."

Shaking his head disbelievingly, Dustin extends his arm out to his friend once he's picked the cable pack up, "Still, you've gotta have snacks at least."

"I've got Eggos." He shrugs with a slight smile, "And candy."

"Twizzlers?"

"And Razzles." Mike's eyebrows dip and he grins, feeling somewhat accomplished and proud, "It's gonna be perfect."

"Please spare me the details, Mike. Some of us are ill-fated in the romance department." Dustin says, handing him his strip of cable. He grips the bottom of the ladder with one hand, waiting for Mike to take the black cord from him. "Now I'm kind of happy I wasn't invited."

Mike grins, wipe his forehead with the back of his hand, "It's not like that." He grabs Dustin's piece of the cord, ignoring the quiet '*sure*,

man' his friend mumbles, and he leans an elbow against the wooden beam as he wraps the dangling cable around it. He clears his throat, tilting his head back to check his work.

"You've gotta thread it more." Dustin suggests, pulling on the loose end of the black wire so it tightens around the high beam. "And that one," he points, "is out."

The taller boy mumbles something under his breath then, stepping down the ladder to inspect the cable. "Damn it." He reaches up towards a specific bulb, wiggling it around for a second as though that's going to magically fix it. "Shit!"

"Mike!" Dustin claps a hand on his shoulder, "It's fine." His eyes brighten as he offers his friend a comforting smile, trying his best to reassure him before he gets worked up over nothing as he has a tendency of doing. "She won't care, man."

(If Mike is the romantic fantasist to Lucas' more cynical realist, and Will is the even ground that holds the Party together with sticky tape and craft paper, then Dustin is the optimist, the snack-bearer and laugh-provider. Dustin is the assurer.)

"Yeah, but-"

"It's fine, Mike." The curlier-haired boy tells him with a slight smack on his shoulder-blade, "And if she doesn't like it then you can just call me and I'll be more than happy to join you." He teases, "With mushroom pizza, obviously. I'm not an amateur."

"Wait," Mike's face falls, "What do you mean 'if she doesn't like it'?"

"She will, though." Dustin's voice raises, surer sounding as he corrects himself. He forces a cheesy smile, giving Mike two thumbs up, "She'll love it. Shit, she'd love a dog turd if you scraped it up off the street and wrapped it up all... *pretty*." When he's fairly happy with his recovery, Dustin glances up at the sky to change the subject, "How long do we have left?"

"Uh," Mike starts, glancing down at his watch, "an hour." His eyes widen then, and lips part slowly as he comes to realise, "Shit! Nancy

was supposed to be here."

"I thought you said she was already home?" Dustin asks, scratching at his elbow as he heads back over to the bench to pick up his soda. He takes a sip, smacking his lips together in degustation. "Ah!"

"I need to call her." Mike rubs his hands down his sides, palms sliding against the dark denim of his shorts.

"I'll do it." Dustin crushes his can of Cola, raises both brows with a grin, "Finish hanging the lights."

Mike crosses his arms, grimacing as one of Dustin's sweaty hands comes to rest on his forearm amicably, annoyingly, "Dude, you're all sticky."

"It's summer, Mike!" He argues, face scrunching, "Besides, my sweat glands should be the least of your worries." That earns him a frown from Mike, "You need Nance back here, right?"

"Like, right now."

"So, pull a Mrs Byers and hang those lights up already! I'll handle Nancy."

Turns out, the whole Nancy situation had been a lot harder to get under control than either of them had expected.

Hopper had arrived just before eight, the cruiser pulling up in the Wheeler driveway just as Dustin had sped away on his bike, offering a slight wave to El as he rode past.

She'd looked around curiously at that, brows furrowing as Hopper made his way over to the front door, hand on her back. Her duffle-bag was hanging from his free hand, the thick yellow straps wrapped around his knuckles with severity.

As soon as the door opened, Mike's face appearing in the open space, the chief had dropped her bag just past the threshold and ushered El inside the house. He backed the two teens past the front door with haste, keeping a firm grip on the doorframe.

"All right, I've gotta go."

"Okay..." Mike eyed him quizzically, confused by his abruptness.

(Wasn't he going to make this hard for him?)

"Your sister here?"

"Upstairs." Mike told him, "She's just showering."

The water running upstairs held the chief's attention for all of maybe four seconds, and then he planted a kiss on El's head and cleared his throat. Turning to Mike with a knowing look, he said, "You make sure she calls me in an hour."

"I'll call in fifty minutes." El threw in before Mike could reply, earning a roll of the eyes from Hopper. She looks up at the man with a grin, casually calm, and he can only sigh in return, pulling the door open wider.

"And be ready-"

"By nine tomorrow." El finishes for him now.

"Great." Mike claps his hands together in front of him, cheeks flushing as Hopper stares him down, all strong and policeman-like, "I mean, you know, cool."

"Yeah." The adult smiles half-heartedly, half in hesitancy, "Sure thing." His hand barely connects with El's shoulder for a quick sideways goodbye hug before he's back out the door again, cruiser headlights still blaring up against the side of the house.

Once the door is closed and Hopper has pulled out of the driveway, Mike quickly holds up a single finger before he's sprinting up the stairs, taking them two at a time. El, left standing alone at the foot of the staircase, watches the space in confusion as the sound of the running water shuts off, and Mike comes barreling back down the stairs.

When he lands at the bottom, long limbs and worn sneakers meeting the carpeted floor with a light thud, El is facing him with a bemused

look on her face, almost intrigued, "Nancy isn't here," she starts with the softest of smiles, and it isn't so much a question as it is an observation, "is she?"

(Apparently the older Wheeler sibling's plans with her would-be-maybe boyfriend had been too important to cancel in favor of supporting her little brother's plans with his definitely-totally-girlfriend. But she'd promised to make it up to him, and explain everything to Hopper if she had to.)

(It had been Nancy's plan to just run a shower and *'I don't know, just wing it, Mike'*. And, while it was unbelievably stupid —or, as Dustin had so gracefully put it, 'amateurish as shit'— Hopper had, by some miracle, bought it.)

"She's not." Mike says, somewhat sheepish, "Did you... do you want her to be?" His eyes widen, lips parting as he considers giving his sister another call, forcing her to come home. "I can call her again, maybe. If you want."

(Maybe it would make El more comfortable if Nancy joined them. Shit!)

El shrugs — though she shakes her head just so — her hands wringing in front of her. Mike takes in her outfit then - corduroy short overalls with a white ringer t-shirt underneath. Her hair's pinned up at the sides, straighter and just a tad blonder from a couple of days of heavy sun exposure, the ends barely grazing the red neck of her t-shirt, and there isn't a trace of makeup on her face because it's humid as hell outside and there was really no need to dress up anyway. She's wearing her usual —his old— white Converse, the fronts of which are all scuffed and scratched.

Mike smiles, slowly feeling his nerves begin to dissipate, and he offers her his hand, "Do you... do you want a drink?"

"Not right now." El says, and she brushes soft curls behind one ear, tongue sliding over her lips, dry from the bare heat of the dimming sun.

Extending his hand, Mike raises a brow with a tilt of his head toward

the back of the house. El takes it with a smile, and she follows his lead as he begins to walk her through the house as though it's the first time all over again.

She hasn't really been over much these past few months; the most time she's ever spent in the house being that one week she'd hid out in the basement. Practically every time she's hung out here in the past year has been in that same basement, without his parents' real knowledge as to who she was and what she meant to Mike, Nancy or any of their friends.

"Okay, so, uh," Mike clears his throat with a hand to his face, fist balled up in front of his mouth awkwardly. He smooths two fingers over his lips, considers his words as he takes in the curious look on El's face, "I... I'll just show you." He says with a slight frown, unsure and fidgety, teeth gnawing at his bottom lip to steady the quickening rate of his pulse.

He reaches for her hand again, palm wrapping around her wrist as he pulls open the sliding doors that lead out into the backyard, ushering her outside with a flick of his head, hair falling in his eyes.

El giggles, and she makes to swipe curling fringe from his face before he can stop her. She brushes the hair back, peering up at him the whole time. With a smile, she says, "Pretty." And then she's leading him out the back door of his own house.

The door stays open behind them, and Mike practically drags her out onto the grass, all mowed and vivid green and perfectly suburban, his grip so light around her hand that they almost lose contact. But El forces herself to catch up with him for those few feet, knuckles turning white as she tightens their linked fingers together.

He stops in front of the large tree that towers over the whole backyard, dropping her hand to slide his own in his pockets. Mike's brows rise as his lips part, gaze set on Holly's baby swing — El can't seem to look anywhere but his face.

"I know you wanted to see what camping was like, you know, *real* camping," Mike says, and he takes a second to untuck the hem of his striped t-shirt from his jeans before continuing, face downcast as he

explains, "And I know that you don't like the woods that much because-" his voice lowers, perhaps unintentionally, "well, because of last year and all that. Hopper didn't agree anyway because of the risk factor, but I figured if we do it here," he gestures around the garden at that, one hand still stiff in his front pocket as his free arm waves around somewhat enthusiastically, "then, you know, we'd be safe. *You* would be safe."

"So, it's..." The brunette says, and she's still not looking anywhere but at him, her face a delicate palette of surprise and confusion and awe, "*like* camping?" She blinks slowly, longingly, gazing up at him with doe-eyes and a pink tint to her cheeks, gently warmed by the setting sun.

"Exactly." Mike grins, right hand slipping from his pocket to rub against the back of his neck nervously, small hairs standing on edge, "Do you, um-" He gently pulls at the ends of his hair, suddenly unsure of himself, thinking that maybe he's made too much of this whole thing, "Do you like it?" He's not ignorant to the way his voice is quieter, calmer than usual — though there's a shaky timber to it all the same.

She nods in a faraway daze, soft and pretty and quite possibly sweeter than any cotton candy he's ever ingested, and her button nose somehow looks even cuter now that the sun's finally started to dim.

"I thought people camped in tents." El voices after a beat, head ducking as though she isn't sure of herself; but the boy smiles, and he extends a hand out to rest it on her shoulder, moving her around just a little bit so she can take in her surroundings.

His palm curls around the soft cotton of her t-shirt, fingers edging past the crossed back straps of her overalls, and he places his other hand on her right elbow, stepping into line behind her as she comes to face a cosy-looking, expertly-built blanket fort — various sheets and cushions laid out on the grass in front of her.

A large checkered sheet hangs over the biggest branch of the oversized tree beside the garden play-set, two corners of the cloth being pegged up to a string of sparkling lights roped around the

highest beam of the wooden structure, one swing swung around the wood to clear the space below. There's a thinner, striped sheet — one El recognises from the family basement — dangling off of a higher branch, hanging almost perpendicularly to the other one. The top of the sheet is wrapped around the branch with a thick, red piece of rope; the blanket swaying in the gentle evening breeze, serving as a back wall to the fort. There's a third one hanging from off of the top of the slide, knotted to a thinner rope that stretches across to the same branch of the tree.

The draped sheets hang so loosely from the frame of the swing-set and the towering tree that the fort would just about be wide enough to fit four people if it had to, and the two back-hanging sheets are long enough to tuck under the thicker blankets laid out on the cut grass, one a familiar mustard color and the other a forest green.

"I just thought it'd be nicer this way. You know, so we don't have to sleep in the dark and stuff." He swallows a breath, can actually feel his lungs swell and his heart stop as he continues, letting go of her shoulders as though she's electric, "And, you know, it's kind of like the last time I made one of these." Mike admits, voice cracking just the slightest, "That was for you, too."

El really looks around the space then, her eyes settling on the dimmed fairy lights hanging from Holly's swing-set. The string of lights is loosely wrapped around the top beam that holds the wooden frame together, a dark cable running along down the length of the yellow slide. There's an extension cord at the base of the slide where Mike plugged the lights in, and it leads back to an outdoor outlet on the porch, hidden behind a plant pot.

The warm lights — not so bright that they'll keep them awake all night, but not quite somber enough for the tent to be enveloped in pitch blackness when night falls — hang a couple of inches above the roof of the fort, their amber glimmer reflecting against the floral and plaid, blue and beige patterns of the sheets; the material keeping the makeshift tent protected from any falling leaves from the tree towering over the yard.

El takes a step closer to him then, mindlessly nibbling on her bottom lip until Mike turns to face her once again. His eyes widen, all mud

brown and long lashes as she reaches for him, glancing down to grab his hand. She intertwines her fingers through his own, swings their wrists around comfortably, casually, as though there's a soft hum of music playing nearby. She tugs him closer, waiting until he's only a few short inches from her before breaking into a beaming grin. His cheeks flush, rose pink in mild embarrassment, in delight, and her right brow hitches ever so slightly as she smiles up at him, all dry lips and dimples.

She starts to the side, two feet closer to the fort with Mike hot on her heels, and her honey brown eyes turn umber in the faint evening sun as she softly says,

"It's like... a home."

"Yeah." Mike smiles in return, keeping his gaze locked on her mouth, watching as a dull simper works its way onto her lips, an accompanying blush rising on her full cheeks, "Home."

He's sure his face is a mirror image of her own, all crimson flush and (unintentionally) trembling, parted lips. Mike looks to the ground for a moment, eyes focusing on a single, far-off weed. He sighs contentedly, but there's an air of uncertainty to his voice, "Are you happy?"

Now that she's actually taken it in, seen the familiar fort and the twinkling lights and the beauty of Mike's work, El can't help the beaming smile that spreads over her whole face, cheeks rose pink. "I love it."

El leans up then, one hand resting on his left shoulder, fingertips sliding over his frame, as she presses a small, soft kiss to his lips. It only lasts a second, but her eyes remain closed all the same, and she ducks her head to lean her forehead against his chin, breathing him in.

Mike grins to himself, moves his right hand from his side to her hip, tentatively touching the warm corduroy. He smooths his hand around her lower back then, pulling her into his front until her arms wrap around him, palms flat against his sides. El sighs contently, and she stands up on her tiptoes to nuzzle her face in against Mike's neck,

breathing a hot, soft, "Thank you for this."

The boy only smiles, staring down at the top of her head as his cheeks heat up, "No problem." He tilts her head back with his free hand then, thumb tracing her jawline as he presses a gentle kiss to her forehead, lips plump and longing, "Anytime."

El blushes, and she pulls away after a moment. But she keeps a hand on Mike's side, fist clenched around the soft cotton of his t-shirt, "Can we sit?"

"Oh." Mike looks down at her, pale skin flushed from warmth and sunlight, "Yeah. Yeah, of course." He gestures towards the fort, blankets softly swinging in the summer breeze. The sun's due to set within the hour, but the sticky, clammy air doesn't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon. The evening breeze is only slight, just about strong enough to make the hanging sheets sway but not quite strong enough to destroy the fort in its entirety.

El sits down on the mustard yellow sleeping bag then, knees curled up beneath her. She watches as Mike copies, settling down on the forest green blanket. "Are you hungry?"

She shrugs, "Hop made me eat before I came." But her eyes land on a bag of chewing candy propped up against a cushion between the two sleeping bags. Mike seems to catch on, because he follows her gaze and picks up the packet with a smirk, handing it over to her to open.

"Yeah," Mike shakes his head, "I had more candy but Dustin stole half of it." He shrugs, not nearly as bothered as he had been when he'd first caught his friend stuffing two packets of Razzles down his pants. With a grin, he moves onto his knees, reaching past El to pull open the top of her sleeping bag. Mike picks up the carton easily, holding up the yellow box in both hands. He shakes the box of uncooked Eggos around with a knowing look.

"Hot or cold?"

"Cold." El smiles, slight crinkle of the nose and all, "It's too warm for warm food."

The girl kneels up, snatching the box from his hands with a giggle before he can stop her. She doesn't open it, instead choosing to place it down at the bottom of her sleeping bag. Her hands drop to her lap, and she toys with the rolled-up legs of her shorts for a couple of seconds.

"What is it?" Mike blinks. His shoulders dip, and his confidence is deflating by the second, "El? Is something wrong?" He has half a mind to reach for her hand, but he refrains, choosing to study every change in her expression instead.

"No." El says, and she's the one who reaches for him then. Her hand wraps around his wrist, and she twists her arm over so their palms lie flat against together, "It's... perfect."

"It is?" Mike's pretty sure his face is burning. El nods, and he can finally breathe, "Dustin was right."

"You *don't* think it's perfect?"

"Well, I mean, yeah. It's pretty perfect." Mike frowns, "It's just not *perfect* perfect. Like, one of the lights went out and half of our candy got stolen." He says the last part with a chuckle, stopping when he sees her gaze focused on the overhanging fairy lights.

El's deep in concentration, lost in some sort of trance for just a moment, fingers tightening in his grasp as she squints, just once, and Mike looks up in time to see the broken bulb light up again.

"Whoa." He says, "That's so cool that you can do that."

She blushes at that, tempting a look at him from across the nylon of her sleeping bag. The yellow material is warm and humid against her legs, and she rises to stand suddenly, never letting go of Mike's hand.

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

El wiggles her wrist, "Come here." She stares down at him, face expressionless and plain. He doesn't make to stand though, so instead she just tugs on his hand and forces him onto his knees. She takes one

step closer to the boy, and her hands slip from his grasp to grip his shoulders. He's eye-level with her chest, and she grins, somewhat amused.

"It's going to rain." She informs him, directing one finger up towards the sky. It's gotten darker over the last ten minutes, the stars shining, off somewhere in the distance, and the trees have stopped rustling from the lack of a breeze altogether.

"How do you know that?"

"I can feel it." She only tosses one shoulder back, turning sideways to look around the yard for any signs of rainfall. "The electricity."

Mike frowns, and he runs his fingers up her wrist to wrap his hand around her forearm then, using her distraction as an opportunity. He bites his lower lip, pulls on her arm until she comes crashing into his front, landing crooked on the green sleeping bag with a slight giggle.

"Better to be under cover if it's going to rain then." He says, and El pulls a face, shuffling back against the comforter as Mike does the same. She yanks the yellow sleeping bag towards them so they're closer together.

The thin sheet hanging behind them is still now, and the one wrapped around the tree branch tickles Mike's side as he leans against the wooden post, back straight and his legs outstretched, sticking out past the makeshift fort.

"You're gonna get sick." El tells him, and she moves into his side, wrapping her arms around his frame as though she can keep him warm, keep him from catching a cold despite the humidity.

"Yeah, El, he's gonna get sick."

The pair glance towards the back end of the yard then, eyes wide in bewilderment.

Mike rolls his eyes once he catches sight of the trespassers, and he can't help the groan that follows, "What the hell are you two doing here?"

The redhead hanging halfway over the yard fence pauses, one leg still in the air. She slides her sneaker down the rest of the wooden fence, wiping her hands down her sides. Lucas follows the girl, but he jumps the fence separating the Wheeler's backyard from their neighbors' with more ease than Max, almost as though he's done it before.

"Calm down, Wheeler. It's not like we wanna be here." Max starts with a frown, "And we wouldn't be if somebody hadn't gotten locked out of their house." She nudges her boyfriend in the side, grinning when he grimaces.

The boy sighs, says, "My parents went out for dinner and they forgot to give me a key. Whatever." He explains, "And Dustin told everyone what you'd been planning so," he shrugs, staring up at the sky much in the same way El had moments ago, "Ah, shit."

"Then go hang out at Dustin's house or something." Mike argues, and he offers El an apologetic look. She only smiles in return, clearly not as bothered by the interruption.

"No way, man, he lives too far away." Lucas refuses.

"And he's heading to Steve's anyway." Max adds. "Sorry, lover boy." She smirks over at Mike, sticking her tongue out at El.

Max grabs Lucas' hand the , pulling him along until they reach the fort. "Wouldn't be my first choice but I guess a cloth tent is gonna have to do." She drops down to her knees beside Mike, waits for Lucas to plop down beside El. "It's nice, Wheeler." She whistles, teasing, "Were you planning on getting to second base or something?"

"*What?* No." Mike scowls. "Shut up."

Lucas leans back on his elbows beside the brunette girl and he smiles when she holds out the now-opened box of Eggo waffles. "Thanks, El." He reaches into the box, grabbing one with a smirk, "Shit, Mike, you brought out the Eggos?" He takes one bite of the defrosted food, winks at Max, "I think he was gonna propose."

El blinks, "Propose?"

"Fuck."

Max stifles a laugh, "This is so much better than watching that Star Wars again." She smiles at El, "It's a little cramped though." She moves to sit cross-legged, and she rolls her shoulders back dramatically.

"Feel free to leave." Mike grumbles.

"Why, so you two can get back down to business?" Lucas snorts, "Nah. I'd rather hang out in the fort. You know, since I didn't get to last time."

"Last time?"

"In my basement."

"When they found me."

"Right." Max nods, having heard all she needs to in order to understand. She grins, jokes, "Explains why we're all huddled in this makeshift tent when it's gonna pour down."

The first drops of rain start to fall then, as if on cue, landing on the toes of Mike's sneakers, and El peeks her head out past one of the sheets to glance up at the sky. The stars are faintly visible, and there isn't a cloud in sight.

"Electricity."

"Shit, it's gonna storm?" Max whines, "You told me it was just gonna rain."

"How was I supposed to know?" Lucas shrugs, and the space between his brows creases, "Do you wanna leave?"

"No." El interrupts them, cutting the other girl off before she can answer. She smiles, shoots Mike a look and waits for his approval before continuing. "Stay with us."

"Okay." Max grins, and she sits up straighter, knees brushing against Lucas' and Mike's as the four of them sit close together in the fort

"We're *all* gonna be sick." Lucas rolls his eyes, "This is your fault." He

aims at Mike.

"How is this my fault?" The taller boy snarls, "I didn't invite you."

"It's your fault because you brought out the twinkly lights, man! You know girls like all that romantic crap." Lucas wiggles his brows, "Now my girlfriend's jealous of our girlfriend and I've gotta step it up."

"I am *not* jealous." Max pipes up, "I just think it's cute."

"It's not a contest!"

"Yeah, because if it was, you'd be winning!"

"Please, you're just pissed because you're a shitty boyfriend!"

The corner of El's mouth curls up then, and she shares a look with Max as the boys continue bickering, "Is this normal?"

"You have no idea." Max grins, and she reaches past the boys to retrieve the Razzles. "Halfsies?"

El nods in return, and she accepts the candy from the redhead when she tips half of the contents into her hand.

"Thank you."

Her free arm falls to her side and she slips her hand into Mike's with ease, intertwining their fingers together without even looking down. She can feel his gaze on her face from the corner of her eye, and El ducks her head, cheeks timidly blushing in reply.

"Home."